Political Studies Association
PSR POLITICAL STUDIES REVIEW
Professional Section: Teaching

Decolonising the Curriculum

Political Studies Review
1–6

DOI: 10.1177/1478929918808459
journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev
SAGE

Neema Begum[1] and Rima Saini[2]

Accepted: 30 September 2018

Social science courses are increasingly coming under fire for the over-representation of white male authors and theorists. Campaigns such as 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' call into question the 'Dead White Men' approach to teaching political theory, where few female and theorists of colour are included on reading lists. The ways in which knowledge is produced, propagated and perpetuated through White, Western perspectives also spawned the related campaign 'Why Is My Professor White?' These campaigns are taking place against a backdrop of immense changes in the higher education sector, which earlier this year saw thousands of university academic staff go on strike over pensions, and a spate of anti-casualisation campaigns crop up at universities across the country. Changes such as these disproportionately affect women and ethnic minorities because of the extent to which we are subject to structural inequalities. Ethnic and gender penalties are present at every academic pay grade. Women are more likely to be on casual, part-time contracts. And ethnic minorities still constitute a minor proportion of senior academic and management staff in most universities.

As women of colour (WOC) in the academy – emerging scholars of race who have yet to begin permanent academic roles – the decolonisation campaigns hold personal as well as professional resonance for us. They fuel our desire to impart real change in the way politics is taught in the United Kingdom and to help make a space for scholars like us. However, this desire must sit alongside the realities of our future in the academy. We both started out PhDs in the mid-2010s with the hope of becoming critical and radical but essentially fully fledged and secure academic employees. The structural changes the academy is undergoing not only undermines the work we do to represent the work of subaltern scholars in the field of politics but makes us question our ability as well as our desire to survive and thrive as academics.

The State of Academia

Increasingly restricted funding, heightened competition for students despite a boom in numbers and increasing corporatisation of the University model have destabilised the simpler academic trajectories of previous generations of academics. Although Universities rely now more than ever on the research and teaching output of academics, we perversely feel undervalued, overworked and debilitatingly insecure about the future of our careers within the sector.

[1]School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
[2]Department of Sociology, City, University of London, London, UK

Corresponding author:
Rima Saini, A229 College Building, City, University of London, St John Street, London EC1V 4PB, UK.
Email: rima.saini.1@city.ac.uk

PhDs and early career researchers almost solely undertake the bulk of seminar teaching in universities. According to the University and College Union (UCU), 46% of universities who responded to their July 2013 Freedom of Information Act request reported that they had more than 200 employees on precarious zero-hour contracts to deliver this teaching (University and College Union, 2013). Remuneration rarely matches the actual number of hours required to read and prepare for teaching delivery. And for those seeking their first permanent job in academia, there is a growing trend of short-term teaching-only contracts with substantial workloads leaving little time for academics to work on their actual research.

As PhDs, we must publish in high-profile academic journals (or perish), write blog posts and engage with community stakeholders to create impact with our research, achieve excellent teaching scores from our students and present our research at – as well as organise and host – conferences, events and seminar series. Often this is unpaid labour, undertaken alongside writing a thesis full-time. Those (albeit few) research students on full scholarships with greater research allowances or those with fewer childcare responsibilities or financial support from family are better able to give the scarce time they have to engage in such activities, adding lines to their curriculum vitae and creating better job prospects for themselves. This only fuels a culture of competition on an uneven playing field. We are increasingly told that having successfully gained a doctorate is no longer enough amid the need for high-quality publications, extensive teaching experience and even proven success in securing grants. For PhD students and early career researchers, crises of confidence are the norm, often tipping into full-blown mental illness. According to a study published in *Research Policy* in May 2017 (Levecque et al., 2017), approximately a third of students working towards their doctorate could be at risk of developing a psychiatric condition such as depression.

The precarities of early career academia are more keenly felt by women, people of colour (POC) and those from working-class backgrounds who may not be able to afford to 'stick it out' until they gain a full-time secure position. Women also tend to be given, whether formally or informally, pastoral roles in universities because we are seen by students and staff alike as the caring, approachable face of the university. As WOC academics, we see our female, ethnic minority students gravitate towards us for mentorship, guidance and support. These roles not only enforce stale gender stereotypes but usually come without compensation and support, despite the extent of emotional labour and responsibility involved.

Representation in the Academy

As WOC doctoral researchers and tutors, our marginality within our academic institutions has never been brought to the fore more than it has now. In 2017, there were just 30 Black female professors. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2017), universities are more likely to employ Black staff as cleaners, receptionists or porters than as lecturers or professors. Women, particularly female academics of colour, are less likely than men to be in senior positions as heads of school or department. The lack of suitable mentors who can relate to our experiences is problematic. It is often difficult to communicate the need for allies and acknowledgement of these issues among the more established, and predominantly White, generation of academics who lack firsthand experience of such difficulties. Mentorship, allies and support from more established academics to the early career community can, in our experience, go a long way in making a positive difference to our sense of belonging as well as career trajectory.

Women are more likely to be on part-time contracts with caring responsibilities, which more often than not has a negative impact on career progression. Despite women

spending more time teaching than on research-related tasks, research has shown female and Black and minority ethnic academics are rated more harshly by their students than their White, male peers in course evaluations. Students are more likely to challenge the classroom authority of female and/or teachers of colour, a role which they expect to be filled by the classic professorial White (middle-class) man. We believe senior staff must be judged on whether they recruit, promote and support colleagues from non-traditional backgrounds. Not only does this have proven, positive effects on academic departments, but can help precipitate the sort of difficult pedagogical and ontological conversations about the Whiteness of higher education. Within the academic space, White, middle-class forms of capital – cultural knowledge and skills – are disproportionately valued over others. These forms of capital not only ignore the resilience POC have accrued in navigating obstacles to achieve a space within academia, but they also deliberately undervalue the sorts of knowledge and critical reflexivities academics within marginal spaces can bring to the table.

Working-class, female and POC academics constantly find themselves needing to codeswitch to 'fit into' the predominantly White, middle-class, heteronormative academic environment. Trying but ultimately failing to fit the classic, British professorial mould results in both a sense of internal unease and external conspicuousness. This lack of fit is felt not only in the presence of the established academic elite but even among our own predominantly White PhD/early career researcher communities. Decolonising the curriculum relies upon who we recruit and promote within the academy, training teachers and researchers of different backgrounds who will contribute to reshaping the academic canon as well as pedagogical practices and creating new institutional norms.

Dead White Men and Attempts to Rehabilitate the Empire

For those of us who are embedded in the fields of political theory and political science, the need to move away from the 'dead White men' approach to teaching is glaringly obvious. Having both studied political theory at undergraduate and master's levels, we experienced firsthand the tiresome way in which the subject was taught. Syllabuses in departments across the country are still characterised by the same roll call of enlightenment scholars that we were taught to analyse and critique but rarely to fundamentally challenge.

As academics, we now see the importance of destabilising privilege by championing 'alternative' types of knowledge. Challenging existing ways of thinking should be at the forefront of all political projects. We have also seen, however, the difficulties of communicating the issue itself, let alone securing allies, for decolonising the curriculum. Within our own universities, we have seen colleagues notably wince at the term 'decolonise', preferring to use the whitewashed, neoliberal concept of 'diversification'. Decolonisation is crucial because, unlike diversification, it specifically acknowledges the inherent power relations in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and seeks to destabilise these, allowing new forms of knowledge which represent marginalised groups – women, working classes, ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) to propagate.

Fear of the term 'decolonise' indicates not only the lack of commitment to but the lack of acknowledgement of the need to challenge – with open, critical, unsilenced debate – White, male supremacy within Universities. This has also brought with it worrying attempts to rehabilitate the empire and whitewash the academy's historic role in intellectualising and justifying racism. Russell Group institutions and Oxbridge can often be the worst culprits. Eugenics conferences at University College London, the backlash against

the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign at Oxford and abuse faced by Cambridge student Lola Olufemi and academic Priyamvada Gopal after their calls for decolonising the curriculum indicate this.

These institutions legitimise the sort of ill-informed and reactionary views on colonialism, which abound in the United Kingdom. Blind patriotism at all levels of society, particularly middle-class and elite levels, frames the British Empire as a part of our history, which deserves to be celebrated. A YouGov poll in 2014 found that the majority of respondents (59%) thought the British Empire should be something to be proud of, with approximately half believing that the colonised countries were left better off for being colonised by Britain (YouGov, 2014). This neo-imperialism was most recently seen in the foreign secretary Boris Johnson's resignation letter where he expressed concerns about Britain becoming a 'colony' of the European Union.

The burden of academic proof for challenging these views on Empire almost always seems to fall on the predominantly female and/or POC academics who research and champion the voices of marginalised and subaltern peoples. When Oxford University's McDonald Centre proposed the 'Ethics and Empire' project by colonial apologist Nigel Biggar, it was scholars of empire, many of them POC, who highlighted precisely why we should be concerned. They rightly critiqued the sensationalism in the rationale of the project which stated that imperialism has been labelled as de facto 'wicked', a view that Biggar seeks to challenge with an analysis of what he terms the 'historical facts of empire'. As an established academic, Biggar gives legitimacy to the debate over the morality of empire (a period of time which came with large-scale murder, mass rape, internment camps, forced labour and starvation, and unprecedented theft of wealth) with almost no reflection on the implications of his own positionality for the project. As social science researchers, one of the first things we are taught in our training is the value of reflexivity, that is, the importance to reflect on our own place within power relations, including, but not limited to, race, class and gender, particularly as they pertain to our own research. We could not research the politics of ethnic minorities, without at least a cursory understanding of why this subject is of personal significance to us, and how it affects our research process. This is a practice we would also anticipate from all our colleagues, particularly those in the upper echelons of the academy.

The 'Inconvenient' Academic

Academics who call out racism, sexism, class-based discrimination, homophobia or transphobia are often met with abuse online, sometimes even labelled 'troublemakers' by colleagues who themselves may not experience these forms of discrimination. When Lola Olufemi drew attention to the lack of BME scholars on the English curriculum at Cambridge University, the headlines suggested that she wanted to take away all White scholars from the reading lists and replace them with Black authors. These reasonable and long-standing arguments for greater representation and recognition are exaggerated and inflamed to become perfect media cannon fodder.

Dr Priyamvada Gopal was framed in the *Daily Mail* as a 'troll' for making a fellow academic (Mary Beard) cry after calling out the neo-imperialism inherent in her claims that it is difficult to maintain 'civilised' values in disaster zones like Haiti. Following this, Gopal was subjected to a horrific sexist racist smear campaign that particularly resonated with WOC like us who have ourselves aligned openly with anti-racist stances and have also received disproportionate criticism both online and in person for

it. The media storm also completely obscured the ways in which Whites' emotions can not only silence but target POC who are trying to elicit serious and critical discussion about racial inequality, in itself perpetuating the racial status quo. The institutionally comfortable 'token' role many of us feel we occupy within academic spaces: the diversity/equality hire and/or the convenient race/ethnicity expert become destabilised, and us POC problematic, when we start identifying and vying for real change within our institutions.

Online abuse faced by female academics of colour on social media is often tolerated because of the importance of sites like Twitter and Facebook for burgeoning academics from non-traditional backgrounds to build a profile, find allies and create coalitions for change. It is not only academics who are targeted but all WOC on Twitter who try to contribute to the political discourse. Amnesty International UK (2017) found that Diane Abbott was abused online more than any other MP during the 2017 General Election with Black and Asian female MPs (Abbott excluded) receiving over a third more abusive tweets when their White colleagues. Although for many this acutely highlighted the problem of how racism and sexism compounds within the political sphere to target and diminish WOC politicians, others have not only been loath to even call this abuse. Claims of free speech and anti-political correctness ring bitter for WOC, in particular, because the underlying sentiment is often reactionary, seeking to silence calls for recognition and representation from POC.

The Road Ahead

Decolonisation needs to gain credibility and traction within academia, not only in terms of the curriculum but in hiring, promotion and publishing. It is an ongoing, sector-wide project that needs allies across the board – from senior staff to students, from the burgeoning WOC scholars, to their White, male colleagues. With the higher education sector undergoing deep structural changes, decolonising the curriculum is necessary to broaden the education our students receive as well as retain individuals from marginal backgrounds in the academy. As such, it goes beyond shoehorning POC on to reading lists, but decolonising the academy itself, so social scientists not only question but challenge structural racisms and sexisms rather than simply preaching the neoliberal virtues of 'resilience' and 'hard work'.

Decolonising academia requires meaningful recognition of alternative perspectives embedded in analysis of power relations, including those of race, class and gender. *Inside the Ivory Tower*, a book developed by Dr Deborah Gabriel (2018) to highlight racial inequality in higher education with all WOC contributors, is one of few publications which illustrates comprehensively – and firsthand – the pervasive Whiteness and maleness of academia. More of these narratives and analyses need to be out in the public sphere. Radhika Govinda of the University of Edinburgh has been leading workshops on decolonising feminist classrooms, teaching universities what academic decolonisation is, what it entails and how an intersectional approach to pedagogy can aid this project.

Exclusion of women and POC can be addressed by thinking about how teachers/module owners design courses. Primary texts as well as secondary articles or follow-up recommended reading by women and POC must be included on reading lists as a bare minimum. This does not necessarily mean replacing others who remain important to the discipline but being prepared to contextualise the ubiquity of White, male authors as a product not necessarily of their superior work but of their societal privilege.

References

Amnesty International UK (2017) Black and Asian Women MPs Abused More Online. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps (accessed 16 October 2018).

Gabriel D and Tate SA (eds) (2018) *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia*. London, UK: Trentham Books/UCL IOE Press.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (2017) Staff at Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom 2015/16. Statistical First Release SFR243. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2017/sfr243-staff (accessed 16 October 2018).

Levecque K, Anseel F, De Beuckelaer A, et al. (2017) Work Organization and Mental Health Problems in PhD Students. *Research Policy* 46(4): 868–879.

University and College Union (2013) Over Half of Universities and Colleges Use Lecturers on Zero-hour Contracts. Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/6749/Over-half-of-universities-and-colleges-use-lecturers-on-zero-hour-contracts (accessed 16 October 2018).

YouGov (2014) The British Empire is 'Something to be Proud of'. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire/ (accessed 16 October 2018).